Coat of Arms

By Bryan Smith

Warm-ups can serve as ice-breaker activities for the first day of class or as a preface to a new theme or topic during the course. They can offer a motivating start to the week or act as an innovative segue between skill area lessons. The activity offered below functions well in each of these contexts and is basic and dynamic enough that it can be easily adapted for students ranging from elementary school children to adult language learners of all ages and at all levels of proficiency.

I developed the "Coat of Arms" activity for the first day of class at our teacher-training institute in Germany. Rather than the traditional "introduce your neighbor" tasks which tend to generate uncreative and predictable language, this motivating and dynamic activity gets the class talking, listening, and thinking while creatively using various language functions and conversational strategies, practicing structures, and building vocabulary.

Using "Coat of Arms" for the First Day of Class

"Coat of Arms" can be used to ease students into the communicative classroom format which may be new and intimidating for many. Most communicative classrooms make extensive use of pair and group activities. Before beginning any pair or group task, students should get to know each other. Knowing the name(s) and a few facts about their partner or group members is usually a prerequisite to more extensive conversational activities. This initial knowledge fosters an atmosphere of cooperation which increases the likelihood of productive communication in the lessons to follow.

Procedures

I have used many variations to the "Coat of Arms" activities for learners of English at all levels. A few of my favorites are listed.

Definition:

A heraldic design was used to distinguish individual families and to authenticate official documents; the systematic use of these began during the 1200s. A complete coat of arm consists of a shield, a crest, and motto (See Figure 3 below).

Option One: General (all levels)

Drawing phase

Divide the class into pairs. If you have an odd number of students make one group of three. Distribute a blank "Coat of Arms" (See Figure 1 below) to each student. It may be interesting to see whether they can identify what it is. I recommend that beginner-level groups work in the single square provided, whereas intermediate-level groups and above should bisect the square vertically and horizontally thus making four smaller sections. Ask each student to draw one picture or scene which illustrates something about their personality or life in a square or section. Remind them that they do not need to be artists and that elaborate drawings are even counterproductive as they take up too much time. The teacher may wish to display his or her own personalized "Coat of Arms" to put students at ease. After my students see their teacher's pathetic drawing ability, they are much more confident! I normally allow about 12-15 minutes for completing the squares. There should be no sharing of information among students at this point!

Negotiating phase

When finished drawing, student's exchange papers with their partner and attempt to elicit information about that person by interpreting the drawing. Partners must ask and answer questions regarding each square, providing clarification as needed. This negotiating phase normally takes about 15- 20 minutes, depending on how animated the group is.

Introducing phase

After the pairs are satisfied they have collected enough accurate information about their partners, they take turns introducing their neighbor to the class. They may comment on things they have in common or on images in the drawing that they may have misinterpreted. This is a good way for the class and teacher to get to know some meaningful details about the individual students.

Option Two: Compare and Contrast (intermediate and above)

Best for heterogeneous ESL/EFL groups.

Divide the class into groups of three and four. The drawings and negotiating phases are the same as listed above, however, while the main purpose of the activity is still to get to know one's neighbor, the emphasis this time is on discovering similarities (and differences) among the members of a group. Each group member takes a turn introducing and commenting on their partner's drawing, citing interesting details they learned, similarities and differences they discovered, and things they may have found surprising. Some examples of dialog generated from the questions and answers in this variation are as follows:

Achim and Claudia are both from warm countries, but he is from the Middle East and she is from South America.

Wolfgang and Jürgen both like to ski, but Wolfgang likes downhill and Jürgen prefers cross-country.

Figure 3 below shows three blank spaces (a, b, c) under the shield. As an added dimension to this activity, you may ask your students to fill in three words which best describe them. Depending

on the proficiency level of the group, students can enter such things as their favorite color, hobby, or food in these spaces. Alternatively, they may list "something I like very much," "somewhere I dislike," and "somewhere I'd like to visit" in spaces a, b, and c respectively. Or they can write a saying or phrase which represents their character or likes. The possibilities here are, of course, endless. The dotted line at the very bottom of the page (d) is for the artist's name. The information shared and gathered in "Coat of Arms" is rich in detail and much more interesting and entertaining than that obtained using a traditional interview format.

Option Three: Tenses (high beginner and above)

The variation is similar to option one above, however, this time, each student is asked to divide his or her squares into 4 sections. The sections represent a progression in the students' life from past to present to future. I normally use section 1 to signify past, sections 2 and 3 for present, and section 4 for future. When drawing, it is important that students understand these designations and use section 1, for example, to depict someplace they lived when they were younger, something they used to like to do, etc. Sections 2 and 3 illustrate something about their personality or life now, and section 4 represents ambitions or future plans. You can proceed with one of the drawing and negotiating phases listed above or easily apply this variation to one of the team game formats listed below. This option, of course, requires students to use various tenses when inquiring about the drawings and introducing their neighbor(s).

Using "Coat of Arms" anytime:
Although "Coat of Arms" was developed as an ice-breaking warm-up for the first day of class, I have since used it successfully throughout the year in a variety of other settings.

Option Four: Teams (high beginner and above)

In this option, the class is divided into two teams, A and B. This variation is used most successfully in situations where the students know each other already, for example, after you are well into the semester/school year or in a public school ESL (or FL) setting. As with each option listed in this article, students should not be told that their masterpiece will be used in a follow-up activity. The focus in this variation is not introducing, but rather describing pictures and objects, interpreting, and inferring based on limited information.

Procedures

Follow the drawing procedures listed in options one and two above. After the drawings are completed and signed, the papers should be folded along the dotted line (x) thus concealing the artist's name. Instead of exchanging papers all drawings are collected by the teacher. The class is then divided into two teams which sit facing each other on opposite sides of the classroom. The teacher now redistributes the papers making sure that all drawings from members of group "A" are given to group "B " and vice versa.

Negotiating Phase A member of team "A" begins reviewing the contents of the "Coat of Arms" aloud and then guesses who it might belong to based on the pictures and "hints" listed in a, b, c at the bottom. A member of team "B" follows with the same procedure until each member of each team has taken a turn. Depending on the size of the group and how the teacher chooses to adapt this activity, he or she may allow each student one, two, or more guesses. It is rare that all students are correctly identified after the first round of questions. At this point each team convenes as a group to decide who the remaining papers may belong to. A second and final round of reviewing and guessing ensue. At the end of this second round, the team with the fewest remaining unsolved "Coat of Arms" papers "wins." For larger classes, the teacher may wish to break groups "A" and "B" into sub-groups.

Some teachers may wish to conduct this game on a point system, assigning two points for an initial correct guess, one point for a correct guess during the second round, and deducting a point for each incorrect guess. For younger learners, it may be better to use a different type of reward system for correct guesses.

Option Five: Panel (intermediate and above)

This option is similar to option four above, however, this time the students engage in questioning the opposite team before making their guesses. In this option it is important that students tell the truth when answering the questions posed.

Here, each student is assigned a number which is written on a piece of paper and propped up in front of them much like a name plate. Each student receives a "Coat of Arms" from the opposite team. Instead of reviewing the drawing aloud as in option four, the student asks one question to a member of the opposite team, referring to one of the squares in the drawing. The answers should provide an indication as to whether this person matches the drawing or not. A sample exchange is in Figure 2 (with a class of 16 students; team A has numbers 1-8, team B, numbers 9-16).

The members of each team should keep notes about the responses during the question-and-answer phase. This prevents them from asking the same question of the same student twice, and helps them organize the information they are collecting. After two or three rounds of Q & A, each team decides which "Coat of Arms" belongs to whom. Again, it is not likely that they will correctly guess each one on the first try. A second, shorter round of questioning may begin with the remaining papers. The "winning" team is determined as in option four above.

As a follow-up activity, the teacher may ask selected members of each team why they posed certain questions. It is very common that what the artist intended in the drawing was very different from how that drawing was interpreted by the opposite team. Also, if you have a "Coat of Arms" which truly "stumps" the panel, it may be a good idea to have that artist explain the drawing. This can be truly hilarious!

Debriefing The debriefing phase is an optional follow-up to this activity. It allows the teacher to review any problems in usage, grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, etc., that were identified

during the activity. The teacher notes the salient errors made and explores alternative ways students could have phrased questions and answers.

Note: The debriefing phase is not recommended for the "first day of class" options listed above.

Discussion

One of the strengths of "Coat of Arms" is that it combines linguistic and non-linguistic tasks, which can be successfully used with all ability levels and age groups. Although this activity emphasizes speaking and listening, it integrates all four skill areas as well as grammar while providing practice of various language functions and conversational strategies. Students synthesize bits and pieces of information gathered throughout the activity and employ various problem solving skills to complete the task. "Coat of Arms" also has a socializing effect in that the students get to know one another better and discover which of their new classmates they have something in common with. Students are free to volunteer as much or little detail about themselves as they wish. Less talkative students may find refuge in the group aspect of the activity, whereas more expressive students get their chance in the spotlight. "Coat of Arms" also helps build cross-cultural awareness while stressing similarities among the group rather than differences. Finally, this concise activity provides the teacher with an arsenal of valuable information about the class which may prove useful in future lessons.

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Figure 1

Figure 2

Team	Question/Response
A (number 1):	"Number 11. Do you like to ski?"
B (number 11):	"No I don't. I don't like sports."
B (number 9):	"Number 5. Are you from a tropical country?"
A (number 5):	"Yes I am. I am from Brazil."
A (number 2):	"Number 15. Do you have two sisters?"
B (number 15):	"No. I have one brother and one sister."
B (number 10):	"Number 2. Do you have a little dog?"
A (number 2):	"Yes I do. His name is Blacky."

Figure 3

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                          [Shield]
   _____      _____      _____
        a                b                c
                         x
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                         d
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